

Essential
RABBIT CARE
For Adopters



Did You Know That Rabbits

- Live 8-12 years or more.
- Must have water and hay at all times.
- Litterbox train and make excellent companion animals in the home.
- Are considered “exotic pets” and have to see special veterinarians trained in their care.
- Should be spayed or neutered for health and behavioral reasons.
- Are fragile pets that are generally better for adults than for children.
- Are the third most commonly surrendered animal in shelters across the U.S.
- Don't pant or perspire, but regulate heat through their ear veins (any temperature over 80° Fahrenheit can be life-threatening).
- Cannot throw up—anything they ingest has to be digested or go through them.
- Live longest and happiest when kept indoors as members of the family.



Introduction

Rabbits make wonderful animal companions in the home. They are truly enchanting creatures that, while domesticated, retain some of the instincts of their wild ancestors.

As prey animals, rabbits are acutely aware that people may hurt or kill them. Therefore, earning their trust often presents a challenge and requires patience on your part; yet once you have met that challenge, the rewards are endless.

To make the most of your life with rabbits, learn everything you can about them. This booklet will get you started.

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Shopping Checklist

- Exercise pen or pet gate
- Litter box
- Grass hay
- Rabbit food pellets
- Litter
- Fresh produce
- Water and food dishes
- Carrier and carrier liner
- Distilled white vinegar
- Toys to fling and chew
- Hideaway
- Grooming tools
- Flooring: linoleum, rubber, fleece, large whelping pad
- Rabbit-proofing
- Cleaning tools and supplies



Do not Buy:

- Wire cages or hutches
- Harnesses and leashes
- Wire hay racks
- Yogurt drops
- Seed & nut treats
- Clumping litters
- Pet clothing

Rabbit Supplies

Exercise Pen or wire **Puppy Gate** to block off an area in your home for the rabbit to live in when you're not able to supervise. 36" or taller for most, but 30" pens can work if a sheet is clipped over the top during the first week or so to prevent your rabbit from jumping over. Make sure bunny cannot stick his head through the wire or get stuck. Pens are not recommended for outdoor housing; they are not predator-proof. Free-roaming your rabbit is definitely possible if you rabbit-proof thoroughly.

Outdoor housing is not recommended. Keeping rabbits outdoors makes it difficult to interact with them and form a bond. Illnesses go undetected longer and outdoor rabbits have a shorter lifespan than indoor rabbits. If the rabbit must live outdoors, purchase or build a large hutch with solid (not wire) floors, absolute minimum 2' x 4' per rabbit, enclosed in a larger welded wire or solid building with a secure lock that raccoons cannot open, and a hiding place for rabbits to get away from noise, light and predators. There should be wire or solid wood or metal on the sides, top, and bottom of the enclosure to prevent predators and rodents from coming in and rabbits from digging out. There must be some form of temperature control for temperatures under 40° Fahrenheit or over 80° Fahrenheit.

Rabbit-proofing: Cable protectors, etc. (see our section on bunny-proofing to determine what supplies you need). This is especially important for "free roam" rabbits.

Litter Box: The bigger, the better! We like large cat boxes or concrete mixing tubs. Older rabbits or those with arthritis may need a box with one very low side.

Litter:

- 100% wood pellets (best option)
- Paper litters: watch to make sure bunnies don't ingest
- Aspen shavings: messy but safe
- Straw litters

Do not use:

- Clumping litters
- Pine or cedar shavings



Rabbit Supplies (cont'd)

Water/Food Dishes: Large, heavy ceramic crocks are usually preferable to water bottles - they can be easily cleaned and bunnies drink more water from a bowl. Food dishes should be shallow.

Toys/Treats: Hard plastic toys such as jingle balls and barrels for cats and birds make good bunny toys. The rabbit should not be able to ingest or get caught on any element of the toy. Pet store treats are usually not recommended for rabbits (check the ingredients before buying). Small pieces of fresh fruit (see recommended fruit list) or dried organic apple wood twigs are healthier.

Hideaway: Boxes made from untreated pine lumber, or clear cardboard houses with no glue, tape or colored ink.

Carrier: Hard plastic carriers that have a top opening. Fleece liners prevent bunny from slipping and absorb moisture.

Fresh Produce: All produce must be fresh and washed thoroughly to remove pesticides and herbicides. Buy or grow organic produce (see recommended vegetable list).



Food Pellets: Purchase a timothy-based pellet for adults and an alfalfa-based pellet for babies. Select plain pellets, with no nuts, seeds or colored bits. Do not store pellets for more than 6 months.

Grooming Products: A cat claw clipper, small flea comb, and rubber brush or hairbuster comb work best for most rabbits.

Area Thermometer: Clip to the playpen or position near your rabbit.

Cleaning Products: Gallon jugs of 5% distilled white vinegar, spray bottle, towels, hand vacuum and/or broom. To disinfect anything coming from outside your household, the best option is accelerated hydrogen peroxide (Rescue™ formula).

Rabbits are highly sensitive to bleach and many other commercial cleaning products—don't use them around your rabbits! Never combine bleach, vinegar or hydrogen peroxide!

Housing

A Hutch is Not a Home. Do not hutch your rabbit. Those small pet store cages and hutches are not humane.

Start With An Exercise Pen. We recommend dog exercise pens that can be purchased at local pet supply stores. A 30-36" tall pen is suggested. Until you can be sure bunny won't escape over the top, just clip a sheet to the top of the pen creating a roof (this can be removed after a few weeks) or, for determined jumpers, purchase a taller pen or metal pen cover. A pen with a walk-through door makes cleaning the pen and interacting with your rabbit much easier.



Sample Setup. Use hard waterproof flooring (hard plastic desk mat, linoleum, rubber) to protect your floor. Wrap a flat sheet tightly around the flooring, and set the pen on top. Add a litter box layered with litter and fresh hay (oat or timothy), toys, water dish, and a dish for pellets.

Your rabbit needs exercise time outside of the pen, in a bunny-proofed area in your home.

Housing (cont'd)

Free Roaming In A Room (Or More)

Install a chew-proof baby gate or Dutch door across the doorway to one room, and bunny-proof that room. If free roam isn't an option, section off a corner for your bunny.



TIP: Create a “rabbit station” in your home for the litter box, hiding box, and water dish, with a plastic mat underneath to protect your floor.

Housing (cont'd)



Attach more than one exercise pen together and hold in place with PVC pipes to create a room-sized playpen.



Gate the doorway and create a rabbit room. Line an extra-tall gate with acrylic panels or wire grids so rabbits can't get their heads stuck.

Rabbit-Proofing Your Home

Rabbit-proofing involves protecting your rabbit from electrocution, carpet fibers, poisonous plants, chemicals, and so on. As an added benefit, rabbit-proofing also protects your valuable material possessions.

Thorough rabbit-proofing is critical to your rabbit's safety. Rabbits cannot cough up (regurgitate), and operations on their digestive systems are rarely successful, so if they ingest hard objects, candles, fabric, plastic, or household chemicals, it can be fatal. Electrical cords are irresistible to most rabbits and very dangerous.



Foiled by the fence, this bunny won't be starting house fires or opening presents before Christmas!

- Lift all electrical cords out of reach or cover them completely with cable wrap that your rabbit cannot chew through. When using cable wrap, make sure you cover the entire electrical cord up to the plug-in.
- Remove all dangerous or destructible objects from reach.
- Cover baseboards, door frames, and wall corners with inexpensive clear corner protectors to prevent chewing.
- Block off the entertainment center altogether, instead of attempting to cover all those wires. Use acrylic sheets, boards, hardware cloth, short exercise pens, or wire grid squares. This goes for the Christmas tree, too.
- Consider installing a baby gate across the doorway of one room and bunny-proof that one room, or construct a large, safe "rabbit living room" with exercise pens clipped together.

Rabbit-Proofing (cont'd)

Troubleshooting

- Is your rabbit chewing under the bed? Block off the underside of the bed altogether with boards or wire grid (NIC) panels.
- Regular cable cover not chew-proof? Try metal channels over your electrical cords.
- Rabbits digging at the corner of the carpet? Place ceramic tiles or grass mats in the corners.
- Do the books on your bottom shelf all have chew marks? Use the bottom bookshelf for rabbit-impervious items such as hard plastic storage boxes or metal filing cabinets, or put a glass door over that shelf. Or attach acrylic sheets using mirror clips.
- Worried about your rabbit ingesting the wood finish off your furniture legs? Cover them with corner protectors.
- Bunny digging or chewing the door? Invest in a kick plate for the door. Provide toys to keep your rabbit otherwise occupied. Rabbits usually dig at the door because they are bored and lonely. The best fix for this, if you have a single rabbit, is to adopt another bunny.



Above, boards keep bunnies from going way underneath the bed where they can't be seen or reached.



"Fence the electronics, not the bunny" ~ Michelle Kelly

WARNING: The only certain way to prevent harm to your rabbit is to create **physical barriers** between your rabbit and hazards in your home. Do not count on training your rabbit not to chew electrical cords. Chewing through "roots" is instinctive; and rabbits know that once you've left the room, they can get away with anything.

Litter Box Training



After her spay, Pantha began using her litter box religiously. She uses one side as a “kitchen” and the other side as a “bathroom.”

When you first bring your adopted bunny home, confine her to a puppy pen with linoleum or other hard waterproof flooring, wrapped tightly with a washable sheet for traction. For bunny’s litter box, use a BIG cat box or other box made of hard plastic.

- **Line the litter box** with **rabbit-safe litter**
- **Top off** with a pile of **grass hay**, such as an oat blend or timothy. The pile of hay should be roughly the size of the rabbit, twice a day.
- **Place** the box in a **corner** of your rabbit’s space.

Do not use plastic liners in your litter box—if ingested, plastic can cause a fatal intestinal blockage.

Whenever you see your rabbit hop into the box, praise her. Never scold your bunny for not using the box. Instead, clean up urine with white vinegar and sweep up droppings, placing them into the box where they belong.

Change all litters frequently to prevent mold buildup:



Dump contents and spray with distilled white vinegar, soak 2-5 mins.



Rinse with soap and water, dry, and add rabbit-safe litter



Add lots of grass hay, piling more on the “kitchen” side



Add an extra handful of hay after bunny has picked through it

Never use clumping or clay litter; it can cause a fatal blockage

Litter Box Training (cont'd)

Tips To Help Speed Up And Improve Box Training

- Use a paper towel to soak up accidents; place it in the box. Pick up stray pellets and place them in the box.
- Keep the floor outside the box scrupulously clean.
- Provide a bigger litter box and/or a second litter box.
- Put fresh hay in the box several times daily to encourage bunny to hop in.

Within a few weeks of training, most neutered rabbits will use the litter box. The occasional stray bunny pellet can usually be expected, although some rabbits have perfect box habits.

Troubleshooting

Bunny goes everywhere besides the box, and sleeps in the box.

Your rabbit is sending you a clear signal to provide a second box, one for him to sleep in, one to use as a litter box.

Bunny's leaving pellets all over the house.

The biggest mistake new bunny parents make is to give the rabbit too much space, too soon. Wait until your bunny's box habits are as good as they are going to be, before letting him run "free" in the home.

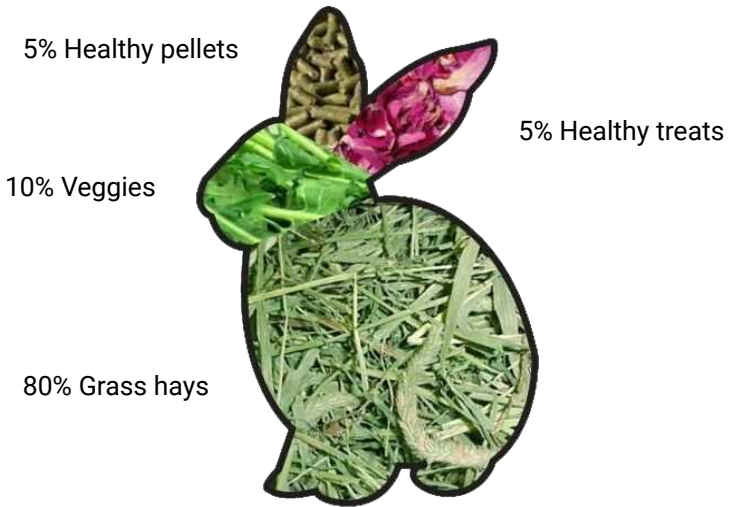
Bunny uses the box, but lifts his tail over the edge of the box and urinates on your floor.

Overshooting usually occurs when the box isn't deep enough or the hay is piled up too high. This is easily solved with a bigger litter box and distribution of hay inside the box. It also helps to place the box in a corner.

Bunny uses the box initially. Later, she goes outside the box. Sometimes she lifts her tail but nothing comes out.

Any change in behavior can indicate a medical issue. A visit to the veterinarian will help with diagnosis and treatment of any underlying medical cause for loss of litter box habits. Possibilities include: bladder stones, GI "stasis," urinary tract infections, and more.

Rabbit Diet



80% of an adult rabbit's diet should be hay.

An adult rabbit's diet should consist of:

- Unlimited water
- Unlimited hay
- Measured, high-quality pellets
- Fresh leafy vegetables (sample selection: Romaine lettuce, Italian parsley, cilantro, and dill).

Anything else is a treat and should be given in limited quantities.

All dietary changes must be made gradually

- Hay should be available 24 hours a day.
- All rabbits need clean water 24 hours a day, preferably in a large, heavy crock to prevent spilling.
- Pellets should be fresh and relatively high in fiber (18% minimum). Do not purchase more than six weeks' worth of pellet food at a time.
- No yogurt drops, salt licks, nuts, seeds, or human foods!

Dietary Recommendations By Age Range

Babies:

- NO FRUITS OR VEGETABLES
- 2-7 weeks: mother's milk, plain commercial pellets, hay, access to water

Teenagers: 7 weeks to 7 months

- Unlimited grass hay and alfalfa pellets.
- At 12 weeks, introduce vegetables (one at a time, quantities under ½ oz.)
- At 16 weeks, introduce fruits (one at a time, less than a tablespoon).

Young Adults: 7 months to 1 year

- Decrease pellets to ½ cup per 6-lbs. body weight
- Increase daily vegetables gradually
- Fruit rations no more than 2 oz. per 6-lbs. body weight

Mature Adults: 1 to 5 years

- Unlimited grass hays (no alfalfa)
- ¼ – ½ cup plain timothy-based pellets per 6-lb. body weight
- 2 cups vegetables per 6-lb. body weight, per day
- Fruit only as treats!

Senior Rabbits

- If sufficient weight is maintained, continue adult diet
- Frail or older rabbits may need unrestricted pellets or other supplements to keep weight up. Consult your veterinarian.



Suggested Vegetables

Select at least 3 kinds of fresh, clean, leafy green vegetables daily, but stay consistent. Add one vegetable to the diet at a time. Eliminate if it causes soft fecal pellets or diarrhea.

- Arugula
- Basil
- Bell Peppers
- Bok choy
- Carrot tops, carrot (small piece)
- Cilantro
- Collard greens
- Dandelion greens
- Dill



- Endive
- Escarole
- Fennel
- Kale
- Mint leaves
- Parsley
- Radish tops
- Romaine lettuce
- Watercress
- Wheat grass



Suggested Fruits

Fruits should be fed in small quantities, such as 3 to 4 blueberries or a small slice of apple. Introduce new fruits gradually. Rabbits can “bloat” (become dangerously ill) if they have access to a quantity of fruit they are not used to.

- Apple (remove seeds)
- Banana (1/4" slice)
- Blackberries
- Blueberries
- Melon
- Papaya
- Pear
- Pineapple
- Raspberries
- Strawberries

Homemade vegetable wash

2 cups water 2 T baking soda

2 T lemon juice 2 cups vinegar

Spray vegetables or fruits, wait for several seconds, then rinse thoroughly. Store the wash in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

Rabbit Handling

Whenever possible, it's best to interact with rabbits at their level, either on the floor or on the couch, rather than pick them up. As prey animals, rabbits do not enjoy being scooped up and suspended mid-air.

When your rabbit has a veterinary appointment, you can usually get him to hop into an open carrier. Place a thick towel or small washable pet bed in the carrier first, to prevent bunny from slipping around and panicking when being carried. Put food or a small treat in the back of the carrier, and quickly close the door when he goes in.

Of course there are times when you have to pick up a rabbit. Here's how to do it right:

How to Pick Up a Bunny



1. Pet to calm



2. In position



3. Liftoff



4. Hold securely

1. Pet your bunny gently on the top of the head.
2. Then slide one hand around and under his front legs and place one hand on his back above the tail, so that while picking him up, you are supporting him at both ends.
3. Lift confidently and firmly until you have him in your arms at about waist level. Do not hold a rabbit up near your shoulder; one leap and your rabbit could go over your shoulder and fall to the floor.
4. Keep a gentle but firm hold on your rabbit. Some rabbits like to hide their heads under your arm. It makes them feel more secure. Do not "trance" your rabbit (hold him upside down on his back). Studies have shown that this raises stress levels in rabbits.

Rabbit Handling (cont'd)

Pickup rules:

- Do not pick up rabbits unless necessary.
- Always support the back of the bunny.
- Do not hold bunny on his back (upside down).
- NEVER pick a bunny up by his ears!
- Do not hold rabbits by the scruff (the back of the neck).

Putting bunny back down

Always have a secure hold on your rabbit and get as close to the floor as possible before making any motion to set him free, or he may launch from your arms and injure himself.

How to catch a rabbit on the loose

When you want to catch a rabbit who has “escaped” his room, press the bunny’s head gently to the floor with the palm of your hand. Then lift confidently using the steps above. If the rabbit is moving too quickly to get your hand on his head, corral him slowly into a smaller area before trying to pick him up. Playpens work well for this purpose.

Don’t chase or try to grab at a rabbit hopping away from you; it’s unlikely to succeed, could result in injury, and will cause the rabbit to fear you. Rabbits run faster than people; to catch them, we must use strategy!

How to lift a rabbit out of a carrier, when necessary

It is easiest to get a rabbit in and out of a top-opening carrier—simply reach into the carrier and lift your bunny straight up. If you don’t have a top-opening carrier, it’s safest for you to open the door and let your rabbit exit on his own terms. If you have to pull him out, hold his legs against his body so that they do not stick out and get caught on the carrier door.

Health Overview

Find a veterinarian near you **before** your rabbit gets sick: Go to www.rabbit.org for a referral to a veterinarian who specializes in rabbits and knows how to treat them.

The Importance of Spay and Neuter

Any rabbit that has not been neutered may develop reproductive organ cancers. This is a probability in female rabbits, making spay mandatory for their long-term health. It is essential to have rabbit spay and neuter operations done by a veterinarian who has experience with such operations and a success rate of at least 99.5%.

See page 24 for more information.

Here are some of the most common problems we see in domestic rabbits:

GI hypomotility (also known as “GI stasis”)

This occurs when a rabbit’s digestive system slows down and the rabbit may stop eating or defecating. It is a very common problem and often unnecessarily fatal. See our page on GI Stasis for more information.

Overheating

Any temperature over 80° Fahrenheit is dangerous for a domestic rabbit. See our Heat Warning page.

Injuries

Rabbits have a fragile skeleton. As a result, when they are dropped or struggle to get free from being held, they can break their legs or backs. If your rabbit is injured, you must take her to the veterinarian to assess the damage.

Predator attacks can be fatal even if you see no injury to the rabbit. A cat’s mouth has bacteria that can be fatal to a rabbit, especially a baby. Raccoon attacks are often fatal even when the rabbit is not killed outright. Fly strike is seen mostly in outdoor rabbits or rabbits with dirty bottoms. Not just botfly: any fly can lay eggs on the rabbit. When the maggots hatch, they burrow into the rabbit. There may be no outward sign until it’s too late.

Health Overview (cont'd)

Rabbits can also have **heart attacks** and die from fear with absolutely no physical contact. This happens most often to rabbits in backyard hutches, when a predator such as a raccoon tries repeatedly to get at the rabbit; but any predator or stressor can cause a rabbit to die of fear.

Poisoning/Change in diet

Do not feed your rabbit human food or change your rabbit's diet suddenly. See www.rabbit.org for a list of some poisonous plants. If you suspect your rabbit has eaten something toxic, call the poison control center or your veterinarian immediately.

Tooth problems/malocclusion

You can look at your rabbit's front teeth to see if she has incisor (front tooth) malocclusion, but you can't see your rabbit's back teeth. Your veterinarian will have to look at the back teeth with a scope. Signs that a rabbit might have molar problems include drooling or a slowdown in consumption of hay (or pellets), or eating in a more gingerly fashion. When the back teeth cut into the gums and tongue, it becomes painful to eat hay; you may see your rabbit start to eat hay or pellets and then let them drop out of her mouth. It's best to be proactive and have a wellness exam every year to detect problems before they impact your rabbit's ability to eat.

URIs (upper respiratory infections), pneumonia, abscesses, and other problems caused by bacteria

Bacterial infections in rabbits are common. A culture and sensitivity test will help your veterinarian determine which antibiotics are most likely to kill the bacteria responsible for causing your rabbit's illness. Abscesses usually have to be surgically removed and then treated aggressively with antibiotics.

If left untreated, these problems can become serious. With proper treatment, however, many rabbits have recovered completely from head tilt, URIs (including "pasteurellosis"), abscesses (even a jaw bone abscess), or pneumonia, and have gone on to live long, healthy, and happy lives.

Health Overview (cont'd)

Ear Mites/Fur Mites

Ear mites are easily treated but absolute misery for the rabbit when they are not. If your bunny has a crusty brown buildup in one or both ears, odds are those are ear mites. Fur mites are harder to detect; white flakes and loss of hair are among the signs that your rabbit should see a veterinarian. The most common effective drug of choice now for treating ear mites or fur mites is selamectin. It is available with a prescription only.



Defining an Emergency

Any change in your rabbit's normal behavior should be cause for concern. One of the most serious is a change in appetite, or refusal to eat. Any time a rabbit refuses to eat for several hours at a time, it should be considered an emergency. Other signs of a health emergency include but are not limited to: lethargy, sitting in the litter box or in a corner for a prolonged period of time, head tilt, drooling, panting, tooth gritting (a sign of severe pain).

As prey animals, rabbits hide symptoms of illness; if you detect that your rabbit is in pain, it's probably extreme. If you have any doubt, consult with a veterinarian who has extensive experience treating rabbits.

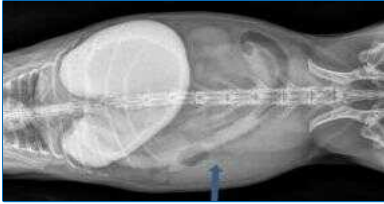
We recommend that you have alternative veterinarians in case your primary vet is unavailable, and that you consider **in advance** what you will do if your rabbit has an after-hours emergency.

Please read the next few health overview pages to learn about GI Stasis, how to prevent heat stroke, and how to protect your rabbit from Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease.

Useful website links: [Medirabbit](http://Medirabbit.com), rabbit.org, houserabbit.org

GI Stasis: What Every Rabbit Caretaker Should Know

Gastrointestinal stasis (properly referred to as GI hypomotility) refers to a common health problem in domestic rabbits, and one that is often unnecessarily fatal. When a rabbit doesn't eat, a host of other problems quickly develop, leading to a downward spiral.



When your bunny stops eating, consider it an emergency. The xray to the left shows bloat, a life-threatening condition. When this rabbit stopped eating, his caretaker knew it was an emergency.

Ways to prevent G.I. stasis:

- Brush bunny regularly, especially when s/he is shedding. Rabbits cannot cough up hair like a cat.
- Keep your rabbit's living area bunny-proofed.
- Feed plenty of grass hay. The indigestible fiber helps push hair through.
- Give bunny lots of exercise.
- If your rabbit drops food while trying to eat it or favors soft foods such as greens over hay, she may have a tooth problem. Get her to the vet before she stops eating altogether.

What you should do if your bunny isn't eating:

- Immediately make an appointment with your veterinarian to get a diagnosis.
- Keep bunny moving and warm.
- Administer a very gentle tummy massage.
- Be prepared: buy liquid simethicone (infant gas drops) to help relieve pain from gas buildup until you can get to the vet's office. *This does not substitute for a visit to the veterinarian.*

What you should not do:

- Take a "wait and see" approach.
- Administer drugs without veterinary supervision.
- Massage rabbit's tummy roughly—this can cause distended stomach or intestines to burst.

Heat Warning

Rabbits do not sweat like we do to keep cool. Furthermore, the domestic rabbit, unlike its cousin the Desert Cottontail, is descended from the Western European wild rabbit and does not tolerate hot weather well at all.



Temperatures over 80° Fahrenheit may cause heat stroke. In hot weather, observe the following to protect your bunny from overheating:

- NEVER leave a rabbit unattended in your vehicle. When you transport your bunny to the veterinarian or pet-sitter, bring along bottles of frozen water in case of emergency. Avoid traveling with your rabbit in the middle of the day.
- Housing a rabbit in an outdoor hutch is not recommended. If you absolutely cannot keep your rabbit indoors during the summer, make sure the hutch or outdoor run has adequate ventilation and is shaded **throughout the entire day**.
- When the temperature reaches 80° Fahrenheit or higher, place a jug of frozen water near your rabbit. Wash a plastic jug, fill it 7/8ths full of water and put it in the freezer overnight. Be sure to have an extra bottle or two ready to swap out.
- Another great way to use frozen bottles of water: place two bottles of frozen water lengthwise, spaced about 8 inches apart in your rabbit's living area, and cover with a thin towel to create a cooling tunnel.

Heat Warning (Cont'd)

- Provide water in heavy crocks if possible, rather than in water bottles with a sipper. The water crock must be heavy to prevent your rabbit from tipping it over. Multiple bowls of water are even better.
- Place a ceramic tile or marble slab in the corner of your rabbit's living area. You can put the tile in the refrigerator or freezer to make it even cooler.
- Rinse a towel with cold water, wring it out, and hang it in front of a fan so the cool air blows through it. Don't train the fan directly on the rabbit, and make sure he doesn't have access to the fan or electrical cord.
- Give your adult rabbit lots of fresh leafy greens to help keep her hydrated. Wet the greens with cold water to give bunny more moisture.
- Be aware of the temperatures on any given day, and on hot days, put out frozen bottles. That way, your bunny will survive electrical or air conditioning system outages.
- If you go on vacation, choose an experienced pet-sitter who knows how sensitive bunnies are to the heat.



Symptoms of overheating include: listlessness, wet nose and mouth, hot ears, convulsions or frantic activity. To treat an overheated bunny, wipe his ears with **cool** water. Wrap him in a cool (**not cold!**), wet towel before rushing him to a rabbit-savvy veterinarian.

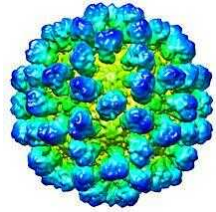
Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2

RHDV2 is a highly contagious and deadly rabbit disease that infects wild and domestic rabbits, hares, and related species. It **cannot** be transmitted to people or other domestic animals.

There is no treatment for RHDV2 other than supportive care.

The best way to protect your rabbits from RHDV2 is through a combination of vaccination, indoor housing, and biosecurity measures.

1. **Vaccinate** your rabbit **every year**.
2. Keep your rabbits **indoors at all times** to minimize contact with insects or dust particles that could carry the virus.
3. Take **biosecurity measures**:
 - Do not wear your outside shoes in the home.
 - Avoid contact with rabbits or hares outside the home.
 - Minimize the risk of spreading the virus on your clothing, shoes, and surfaces, using shoe covers and disinfecting with recommended products only in safe concentrations. Effective disinfectants include: bleach (1:10 dilution) and accelerated hydrogen peroxide (Prevail, Accel, and Peroxigard). **Do not use these disinfectants on or around your rabbits.**
 - Keep mosquitoes and flies out of the home with screens.
 - Keep pets that go outdoors separate from your rabbits. If your dog goes on hikes, wash paws with soapy water.
 - Do not feed greens that you have foraged (dandelions from the yard, for example). Rinse vegetables and fruit thoroughly before feeding to your rabbit.
 - Feed hay that has been harvested at least 105 days prior.



If you find a deceased rabbit whose cause of death is unknown, do NOT touch the rabbit. Instead, report the location of the rabbit to your state's agricultural or wildlife agency.

Grooming

Rabbits are self-cleaning and should **not be bathed**, with the exception of spot-cleaning. Any staining on the fur should disappear after the first post-neuter shed, provided you make sure the litter box has plenty of clean hay on top. If you see continued staining, this could indicate a medical problem—consult your veterinarian.

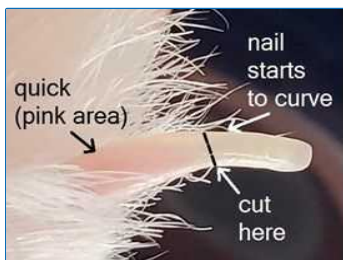
Brush, comb, or pet your bunny gently to remove excess hair. Short-haired rabbits need at least once weekly brushing, while long-haired rabbits need daily combing and occasional trims or clips—see your professional rabbit groomer or veterinarian for that. When shedding, all rabbits must be combed 2-3 times a day to help reduce the amount of hair they ingest.

For fleas, use a flea comb dipped in soapy water to remove as many as possible, and see a veterinarian. **NEVER use over-the-counter flea meds on rabbit without consulting with a veterinarian—many are toxic to rabbits.**

Elderly or obese rabbits may not be able to clean themselves properly, and in that case, require trimming with blunt-nose scissors, **spot cleaning** or a bottom bath, using a mild soap and rinsing and drying thoroughly. It's important to keep rabbits clean and dry to prevent infection and fly strike.

While grooming, **check bunny from head to toe**. Flaky skin, hair loss, lumps, injuries, and rashes all require veterinary attention. Examine the eyes for cloudiness or tearing, ears for excess wax buildup and ear mites (brown crusty buildup inside the ears), and front teeth for malocclusion. Look for moisture around the chin, which could indicate back tooth problems.

Neglect in overall personal hygiene could be a sign something else is going on with your rabbit—consult with your veterinarian to make sure it isn't anything serious.



Trim rabbit nails every 6-8 weeks using claw trimmers. Clean the scent glands at the same time, using a cotton swab. Either go to a rabbit groomer or veterinarian, or have them show you how to safely do that at home.

The Importance of Spay and Neuter

Your adopted rabbit has probably already been altered, but if not, it's critical that you get that done for the following reasons:

- **Overpopulation:** Rabbits are the third most commonly impounded and killed animal in shelters across the U.S. Even more rabbits are abandoned outside, where they suffer a cruel death.
- **Health:** Unspayed female rabbits have a greater than 50% probability of developing cancer. A well-behaved, neutered rabbit is more likely to be kept safe indoors, and indoor rabbits have a longer lifespan than rabbits kept outdoors.

Behavior:

- **Before neuter**, rabbits may spray urine, refuse to use a litter box, and engage in territorial behavior such as boxing or biting. Unspayed females may have "false pregnancies," whimper, gather hay and pull out their hair to make a nest. Unneutered males often engage in non-stop mounting behavior. Unaltered rabbits are more likely to fight and injure or kill other rabbits. **After neuter**, almost all rabbits will stop spraying and learn to use a litter box.
- **Companionship:** Domestic rabbits are social animals and form lifelong bonds. Nothing provides better company to a rabbit than another neutered rabbit. Neutered rabbits also tend to form a more civil relationship with humans and other animals in the home.
- **Happiness:** Litter box-trained rabbits are given more freedom in the home; more space makes for a happier bunny. Freed from the frustration of surging hormones, the neutered rabbit can enjoy a calm life with a rabbit friend.



Adopting a Second Bunny

Rabbits are social animals and almost always love having a member of their own species to snuggle and groom.

Pros and cons of adopting a second rabbit:



Pros:

- Your first bunny will be infinitely more happy, once the bunnies are bonded.
- Rabbits live longer, on average, when they have a bunny friend.
- You can save another bunny's life!
- You don't have to feel guilty about leaving your rabbit all alone when you're at work.
- There is nothing more endearing than rabbits snuggling together.

Cons:

- The bonding process can be slow and scary. It might cost \$\$ if you seek bonding help from the professionals. Tip: If you ever go out of town and have to board your bunny anyway, it makes sense to have your rabbit bonded with another during that time.
- You have to factor in the cost of veterinary care for a second rabbit.

Unless you have extensive experience bonding rabbits already, it's important to have support and advice from a reputable rabbit welfare group. You will want to take your rabbit on "dates" with potential partners, before you adopt a second rabbit and find out that they are intent on killing one another—rabbits have preferences when it comes to their loved ones, just like we do! Ask which rabbits have easygoing personalities and which insist on being the boss bunny.

Bonding rabbits can be tricky, but once it's done, you'll know it was the right thing to do.

Rabbit Bonding

Basic Rules

Rabbits must be spayed and neutered at least a month and fully vaccinated against RHDV prior to introduction.

All rabbits must be introduced and bonded in neutral territory. Rabbits are extremely territorial – if one rabbit smells another on a litterbox, hiding hut, or even carpet, that can prevent bonding.

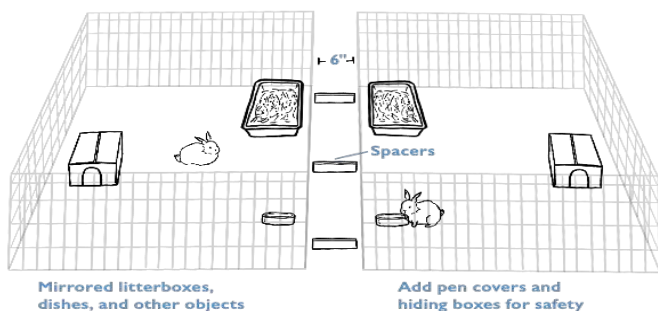
Let the rabbits choose their friends. Start with “speed dates.”

Personality is the most important factor, but male-female bonds tend to be the most stable. An easygoing rabbit can sometimes be bonded with a rabbit of the same sex.

Rabbits should be of similar energy level and physical condition.

Babies should only be bonded with other babies; elderly and disabled rabbits should only be bonded with similar rabbits.

Before introducing rabbits, make sure they're healthy.



Procedure

- 1. First Date:** Once a rabbit matchmaker has helped find a promising match, keep the rabbits together for a minimum of 1-2 hours. This allows the rabbits to relax and act more “themselves,” which gives you a better feel for whether or not they are suited. A good first date is not a *guarantee* that rabbits will get along long-term.
- 2. Side-by-Side Living:** Set up two playpens next to one another in a neutral territory. **Space pens at least 6”** apart and place objects between the pens, so that rabbits cannot bite or claw one another through the pen grid. **Mirror** placement of litter boxes and water dishes and other objects. (See graphic.) **Switch rabbits and litter boxes** back and forth between pens daily to get them cross-scented. **If possible, leave the rabbits side-by-side for a minimum of two weeks.**

Rabbit Bonding

Procedure (cont.)

3. Building the Bond: Start with a small, neutral space. Provide a fresh hay box, a heavy water bowl, and a few greens to share. **Sit on the floor** with the rabbits next to one another in a hay box or on your lap, facing in the same direction. Pet both rabbits. Make sure neither reaches to bite the other. After a few minutes, allow them to move about the bonding area. Continue monitoring them constantly during the first few hours. Overnight, sleep near the rabbits to monitor. Once rabbits live together for 48 hours in neutral territory, it's rare for them to fight. **Do not allow fighting!** To diffuse tension or stop head-to-tail circling before it turns into a fight, try whistling, clapping your hands, or pressing the rabbit's head gently to the floor.

Acceptable behavior:

- Ignoring the other rabbit, grooming oneself.
- Grooming or snuggling with the other rabbit
- Some humping, nipping, or chasing are ok as long no rabbit is traumatized.

Unacceptable behavior:

- Lunging at the other rabbit's face.
- Pushing head under the other rabbit's stomach or backside
- Prolonged humping or humping the other rabbit's head
- Head-to-tail circling (a precursor to fighting).
- Fighting.

Call off the bonding permanently when one of the rabbits stops eating, trembles, screams, or sustains an injury requiring stitches or antibiotics.

Once rabbits have been safe together for at least a week, proceed to

4. Cementing the Bond: Set up a playpen in the room where they will be living. Continue to watch the rabbits closely for the next few days.

Bonding is a process. After a few weeks of co-existing safely, the rabbits may move closer to one another, snuggle, or groom each other. Sometimes it takes longer than that. Regardless, once they've lived safely together for more than a couple of weeks, rabbits have formed a bond and **should not be separated**. Being separated from their mate causes stress! Bonded rabbits even go to the veterinarian together for their annual vaccinations and check-ups.

Introducing Other Animals to Rabbits

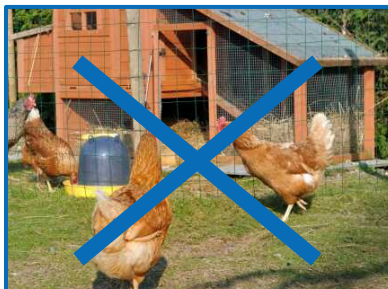
Species Not Safe With Rabbits

Having predator species around rabbits can be risky since rabbits will potentially be stressed (which can lead to illness) or have a heart attack, even when kept completely separate.

Never house **ferrets** or reptiles such as **snakes** in the same room with a rabbit. Snakes will sense the rabbit and vice versa, creating a stressful environment for both. Ferrets should not be in close vicinity of the rabbits' living area. The mere smell of a ferret causes extreme fear in many rabbits. Both snakes and ferrets are resourceful and able to squeeze through small openings.

Rodents such as **guinea pigs, mice, rats**, etc. can potentially be in the same room, in **separate living quarters**. But they should not live together. Rabbits often carry Bordetella, which can be fatal to a guinea pig. Guinea pigs, rats, and mice also carry diseases that are dangerous to rabbits.

For health reasons, chickens (or other **birds**) **should not be in the same living area** with rabbits. Chicken feces and feed pose a risk to the rabbits digestive system, while dust from feces impacts the rabbit's sensitive respiratory system. Rabbits could also pick up lice and chicken mites, common on chickens. And chickens may carry salmonella bacteria, which can be fatal to rabbits.



Some **indoor** birds may work out, depending on the kind of bird and whether or not they can be kept in a separate room. A quiet bird such as a canary, budgie or cockatiel can live near rabbits.

It's still important to keep bunny away from bird feces and birdseed.

Cats and Rabbits



Generally, cats and rabbits are much safer companions than dogs and rabbits. But not always. Pay close attention and never allow a cat to chase or attack a rabbit.

Rabbits will often set the tone of the relationship by establishing territory and dominance over the cat.

This may result in the cat avoiding the rabbit, but that is safer than the cat chasing the rabbit. You do not want a cat to **break a rabbit's skin**; this is particularly dangerous to baby rabbits.

Consider the ages and activity levels of both species. Older and calmer is generally the best bet.

How to Introduce Cats and Rabbits:

Start with bunny in a large, covered playpen with a hiding box. When both are comfortable with each other's movements and smells, move forward with your introductions, holding the cat on your lap. Continue short sessions until everyone is feeling comfortable together. Always provide a safe place of retreat for each animal, such as a cat tree or wooden hiding box.

Safety first!

Cat claws and mouths carry harmful bacteria; even a playful swat or love bite to your rabbit can cause a serious infection. Keep cat claws trimmed, and consider using claw covers.

Make sure that the cat litter you use is non-clumping and not toxic to rabbits. And keep cat litter boxes and cat food out of bunny's reach.

Summary:

- An indoor-only, adult cat with a confident adult rabbit in the same size range is the best combination.
- Supervise to prevent bites or scratches, which can be deadly.
- Provide safe places for cats and rabbits to hide.
- Trim cat claws monthly.
- Don't use clumping or other cat litters not safe for rabbits or allow rabbits access to the cat's food dish.

Dogs and Rabbits

Before setting up bunnies in a home with dogs, look at how the dogs do with rabbits in a neutral location, with dog trainers present to evaluate. Dogs are on a leash a few feet away and rabbits in a safe playpen with a cover and someone in the pen to help protect them if necessary. Look at 1. how the dogs react to those specific rabbits 2. how the rabbits react to those specific dogs, and 3. how the caretaker works with the dogs.

Even if the neutral territory introduction looks good, a dog can react differently to a rabbit on home turf, based on different stimuli.

Some things we ask dog caretakers to consider before thinking seriously about fostering or adopting a rabbit:

- Is your dog high-drive, hyperactive, or a couch potato? Older and obedience-trained, or a young pup?
- Does your dog chase squirrels? Many dogs are ok with one species (cats) but not another (rabbits), and put rabbits in the "squirrel" category. Dogs can also react differently to individual rabbits or different stimuli.
- Does your dog bark often? If so, is it a high-pitched or low-pitched bark? How loud?
- Do you have more than one dog? Dogs behave differently in packs.

Understand that the dog may not mean any harm, yet the rabbit could still have a heart attack from fear if the dog wants to "play" or even be affectionate toward the rabbit. Ideally, the dog is disinterested.

Consult with a professional dog trainer for advice on how to introduce dogs and rabbits safely.



Dogs and rabbits should not be left together unsupervised.

Couch potatoes tend to be safer together than active dogs and bunnies.

Basic Rabbit Care Review

Rabbits make wonderful animal companions in the home. But they are **not** low-maintenance pets.

Neuter your bunny! Neutering (both males and females) dramatically decreases the chance of reproductive cancers, makes litter box training easier, and reduces chewing and territorial behavior, such as spraying.

Litter Box Training Most rabbits can be litter-trained and allowed supervised freedom in the house.

Handling Handle with care! Rabbits have fragile skeletons and can be seriously injured if dropped or allowed to fall.

Diet Your adult rabbit's diet should include unlimited water and grass hay, plain rabbit pellets, and fresh, washed vegetables and leafy greens.

Note: Rabbit digestion is sensitive, so you must introduce new foods gradually. Young rabbits age 3 months and under should only be fed hay, rabbit pellets, and water, and **no fruit**.

Location Rabbits do not tolerate heat, dampness, or drafts. Your rabbit should be in a quiet, safe location close enough to human activity so she doesn't become lonely. When cleaning or doing construction on your home, make sure bunny is far away from toxic fumes.



Indoor Housing

Secure exercise pens 30-36" tall are best for indoor "starter" housing. If bunny jumps out, cover the top of the pen for a couple of weeks until she establishes boundaries. You can put linoleum over your flooring to protect it from chewing, digging, and damage from "accidents."

Rabbit Care Review (cont.)

Bunny-Proofing Cover electrical cords. Keep the floor clear of anything that can harm your bunny.

Outdoor Housing is not recommended. Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease is far more likely to kill outdoor rabbits. Rabbits are prone to heat stroke and fly strike (often fatal) and can be killed by raccoons, hawks, dogs, feral cats, and other predators. Rabbits often die from a heart attack when predators try to get at them. Myxomatosis—for which there is no approved vaccine in the U.S.—is another lethal virus on the rise and more likely to spread outdoors.

A Bunny for Your Bunny Rabbits usually like to have friends of the same species. But rabbit matchmaking can be dangerous, so it's best to consult with a rabbit group for tips on bonding.

Dogs, Cats, and Other Animals Gentle, indoor cats usually work out a good relationship with rabbits. Dogs must have a low prey drive, be quiet, obedience-trained, and well-behaved for them to have a safe relationship with a rabbit. Do not expect any other animal to behave around a rabbit—always supervise introductions!

Veterinary Care Look for a veterinarian who specializes in rabbits and knows how to treat them.

Vaccinate Protect your rabbit from Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV).

Medical Emergencies Rush your rabbit to the vet if you see lack of appetite; diarrhea; few or no fecal pellets; listlessness; crusty ears; overgrown teeth, straining to urinate; any lump or swelling; head tilt; or any sudden behavior change. One skipped meal could mean your rabbit is in grave danger. Review the symptoms of “GI stasis” and learn what you can do to help protect your rabbit from it.

Grooming Rabbits are self-cleaning and should not be bathed. Trim rabbit nails every 8-12 weeks. Brush, comb, or pet your bunny gently to remove excess hair. For fleas, see a veterinarian. NEVER use over-the-counter flea meds on rabbit without consulting with a vet—many are toxic to rabbits.

Thank you for adopting! We hope that this booklet helps you care for your bunny and that you have a long and happy life together.

Help the Rabbits



Volunteer

Please consider volunteering to help abandoned rabbits. Animal shelters and non-profit groups may certify community service hours if you need those for work or school.

Foster

If you have the time and space, consider fostering a bunny. Fostering is a wonderful way to help save lives without making a long-term commitment. Each shelter and organization has its own policies when it comes to foster expenses and returns.

Donate

Animal shelters and rabbit organizations always need donations and usually have a Wish List of supplies they need for the rabbits.